

RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY, PRACTICE AND THE CONSTITUTION  
THE THIRD HAYMAN RUSSEL BOTMAN MEMORIAL LECTURE

Response to Justice Zak Yacoob by Prof Sandra Liebenberg,  
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Justice Yacoob has so skilfully captured the essence (or essences) of Russel that it is hard for me to imagine what I can add in this brief response. So I will simply confine myself to highlighting how the various aspects of who Russel was as a person manifested themselves during his tenure as academic and Rector of Stellenbosch University. This was the capacity in which I got to know him and engage with him on various projects, including the transformation of the University and particularly the Hope Project, about which I will say more shortly.

Firstly, I will reflect on “Russel the activist for social justice” – the first aspect which Justice Yacoob highlighted. One does not traditionally associate a senior academic and particularly not someone who has reached the top echelon of University management with being an activist. And yet, Russel managed to infuse the spirit of activism into his work as Rector of this University. Although the work of transformation of the University had already started under the tenure of Russel’s predecessor, Prof Chris Brink, with Russel’s inauguration the winds of change really started to blow. The pace of transformation quickened and there was a heightened awareness that it could no longer be business as usual at SU. Russel displayed leadership and courage in driving this change against the headwinds of vested interests who sought to keep us anchored in the old ways of being and doing things. As Beryl, Russel’s children, and those

close to him will surely attest this activism came at a personal cost and required sacrifices from Russel and his family.

I see this activism as very much a continuation of his anti-apartheid activism an activism that was rooted in a commitment to the deep transformation in race relations and institutional culture our Constitution envisages. This very much resonates with the leitmotifs of “struggle and sacrifice” in Russel’s life which Justice Yacoob highlighted.

Secondly Justice Yacoob drew our attention to “Russel the engaged scholar of theology”. Already evident in the title of his doctoral study, “Discipleship as transformation? Towards a theology of transformation”, his scholarship made a seminal contribution to a theology of social justice both in South Africa and internationally. Centred on the dignity of the human person, Russel’s scholarship illuminated how human dignity requires the dismantling of racial, gender, class and other forms of social and economic injustices. His theology of socially-embedded human dignity resonates with the words written by Justice Yacoob in the famous judgment of the Constitutional Court in the *Grootboom* case:<sup>1</sup>

“The right of access to adequate housing is entrenched because we value human beings and want to ensure that they are afforded their basic human needs. A society must seek to ensure that the basic necessities of life are provided to all if it is to be a society based on human dignity, freedom and equality... Furthermore, the Constitution requires that everyone must be treated with care and concern... In short, I emphasise that human beings are required to be treated as human beings.”<sup>2</sup>

It is in fact particularly fitting that Justice Yacoob delivers tonight’s lecture as socio-economic rights and particularly the *Grootboom* case which dealt

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<sup>1</sup> *Government of the Republic of South Africa and Others v Grootboom and Others* (CCT11/00) [2000] ZACC 19; 2001 (1) SA 46; 2000 (11) BCLR 1169 (4 October 2000).

<sup>2</sup> *Grootboom*, paras 44 and 83.

with the right to housing of the poor were very close to Russel's heart. Russel understood that socio-economic rights were not about charity, good deeds, or "hand-outs" by the rich to the poor. They are fundamentally about justice – creating new forms of social and economic relationships which do not result in whole classes of people being excluded from meaningful civic and economic participation.

The third aspect of Russel which Justice Yacoob noted was his vision of the academic project and the role of the University in a transforming society. I refer in this regard to "Russel the visionary University manager". Whilst Russel undoubtedly appreciated the value of academic research in its own right, he also understood that academics were also expected in the parlance of the National Development Plan to be "active citizens".

Universities globally are undergoing rapid changes in response to rapid technological developments, the decline in public funding, and the demands of a changing job market. At the same time we face deepening inequalities both between and within national states; the fundamental questions which climate change poses for the economic orthodoxies underpinning unsustainable levels of economic growth and consumption patterns; massive human migration and population displacement; the spread of authoritarianism; and the growing threat to the human rights values and multilateral institutions of the United Nations created after the Second World War.

These global seismic shifts invite a renewed critical reflection on the role of academics and Universities. The South African academy must grapple with these global challenges in the context of our unresolved national questions – redress of the political, socio-economic and cultural legacies of colonialism and apartheid and our responses to the crisis of ethical governance engulfing the country.

Russel as Vice Rector of Stellenbosch University was prescient – indeed prophetic – in leading the University to a new engaged model of academic citizenship. As is well known he initiated the University’s Hope Project which sought to infuse “a pedagogy of hope” in all pillars of the academic endeavour – teaching, research and community engagement. This pedagogy of hope was not a Pollyanna vision of hope against all realistic odds or an expression of a passive attitude - “sit back and hope for a good outcome”. Rather, it was deeply rooted in a Freirean-inspired philosophy of aligning the intellectual project with overcoming the major forms of oppression and injustice of the day. As Russel put it, quoting the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire:

“A critical pedagogy is a progressive pedagogy of transformation. It seeks to transform broken realities, and one of the tasks of the progressive educator is to “unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be.”<sup>3</sup>

Russel persuaded the University’s Council to release significant trust funds to stimulate Hope projects across a range of faculties and disciplines. In the Law Faculty, the Hope Project funded a project entitled, “Combatting Poverty, Homelessness and Socio-Economic Vulnerability under the Constitution.” Through research, postgraduate training, community interaction, conferences, and public engagement colleagues in the law faculty sought to explore how various aspects of the Constitution could help overcome the challenges of poverty and homelessness in South Africa. Similar projects were launched in other Faculties, including the faculty of theology.

These projects helped shift the University towards a more engaged model of scholarship and teaching, and inspired many academics and

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<sup>3</sup> H R Botman ‘Armoede en Onderwys’ Toespraak by die Armoede-konferensie van die Nederduits-Gereformeerde Kerk en die Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika, Sanlam-hoofkantoor, Belville, 16 Maart 2011.

students to feel that our work – if appropriately supported - could make a difference. The Hope Project was an important contribution to the arduous, on-going project of acknowledging the University's role under apartheid, and of committing to the non-racial, non-sexist and just society proclaimed by the Constitution. I for one hope that the centenary of the University next year will be an occasion to deepen this process of introspection, reflection and commitment which Russel set in motion.

In an age of cynicism, passivity and self-involvement Russel's message of hope, of compassion, and of active citizenship has left an indelible mark on the University and on South Africa as a whole. It has also had a global impact as the honorary doctorates conferred on him and the international tributes which poured in after his death attest.

Justice Yacoob alluded to the leadership crisis that currently confronts us in South Africa. Russel was a model of ethical, caring, and visionary leadership. His life and all that he achieved and stood for should stand a true beacon of hope in these trouble times.